

Joseph Medill and His Positive Role in Illinois History

Sarah Troutman
Oregon High School, Oregon
Teacher: Sara Werckle

Throughout history, the state of Illinois has produced many admirable men and women who have made a difference in Illinois and the nation. Examples of these men and women are Abraham Lincoln, Ulysses S. Grant, Jane Adams, Susan B. Anthony, and Ronald Reagan. One man who may not be as well known as the previously named individuals but that certainly made a mark in Illinois history was Joseph Medill. A man of courage and conviction, Medill was instrumental concerning many issues. One way in which Medill was important to Illinois was his work involving the rejuvenation of the ailing *Chicago Tribune* in 1855. In addition to this, Medill and his work as editor for the *Tribune* contributed in many important ways to the successful campaign and presidential election of Abraham Lincoln. In 1871, after writing an encouraging editorial directed to Chicagoans after the Great Chicago Fire, Medill was elected mayor of the city of Chicago, only one month after the fire devastated the city. During his time in office, Medill used the power he held in a sagacious, practical way, and positively affected the city.

It is surprising to note that although Joseph Medill certainly spoke patriotically through his *Tribune*, he was born near St. John, New Brunswick, Canada, on April 6, 1823. Medill lived there until 1832, when he moved to Massillon, Ohio, with his family. There, Medill learned responsibility by helping take care of his five younger siblings, as well as raising crops on the family farm. While performing these duties at home, Medill found opportunities for his education. He obtained it through formal schooling, as well as

through reading materials such as Shakespeare, Milton, Dickens, and Horace Greeley's *New York Tribune*. Interestingly enough, Medill was later employed under Greeley in Cleveland during his early career.

Medill's first tried teaching as a career to earn money for his family after his family's house burned down. Dissatisfied with this, Medill later entered into a law partnership. However, Medill became dissatisfied with this position as well and moved on to journalism. Between 1849 to 1855, Medill tried various newspapers ventures, achieving some success. He also earned fame by coining the term "Republican" for the political party associated with the name.

It was not until 1855, however, that Medill met with real success with his newspaper ventures. Encouraged by Horace Greeley, Medill bought the *Chicago Tribune*. During his years as editor of the *Tribune*, Medill brought major changes to the then struggling newspaper and helped it become one of the strongest journalistic voices in Illinois. According to the Northwestern Medill School of Journalism, "he was to be the brain and sinews of the *Tribune* . . . it was he who gave the paper impetus and direction. It was he who made it an institution and by it alone, save for periods of brief official service, his sound ideals of citizenship found expression and realization." Under Medill's leadership, the *Tribune* became more widely read, and the daily circulation of the periodical tripled. Undoubtedly, the prosperity of the *Chicago Tribune* is indebted to the untiring work of Joseph Medill.

As stated, under Medill's leadership, the *Tribune* represented Republican views and sentiments. It also supported a rising Republican figure in Illinois -- Abraham Lincoln. In the spring of 1855, Lincoln personally met with Medill in the *Tribune* offices

at Chicago. After that, an alliance was forged between Lincoln and the *Chicago Tribune*. As Medill was a devout Republican, he supported Lincoln and publicized him through editorials. In 1858, an election year for the United States Senate, the *Tribune* challenged Senator Stephen A. Douglas to a series of debates with Lincoln, a candidate for the United States Senate. This challenge can be found in the July 22, 1858 editorial, entitled “A Question of Taste,” which states: “Let Mr. Douglas and Mr. Lincoln agree to canvass the State together, in the usual western style . . . If Mr. Douglas shall refuse to be a party to such an arrangement, and it will be because he is a coward.” Although Lincoln lost the election for Senator, this editorial, along with three subsequent editorials, revealed Douglas’ weaknesses. These editorials helped boost Lincoln’s popularity and increase the *Tribune*’s profits.

In 1866, shortly after President Lincoln was assassinated, Medill left the *Tribune*, feeling that there was not any more “purposeful activity” for him. Six years later, in 1871, Medill returned to Chicago, only to be faced with the city’s greatest tragedy -- the Great Chicago Fire. Through all the turmoil, Medill extinguished fires on the *Tribune* buildings roof, ordered journalists to chronicle the disaster, and managed to print a newspaper three days after the destruction of the city. In what has been deemed his greatest editorial, Medill wrote the following in the Wednesday, October 11, 1871 issue of the *Tribune*: “In the midst of a calamity without parallel in the world’s history . . . the people of this once beautiful city have resolved that CHICAGO SHALL RISE AGAIN.”

Due to Medill’s encouragement of the shocked Chicago inhabitants and his optimism, Medill was nominated and elected mayor of Chicago. In his inaugural address, Medill proclaimed a message of hope, stating that “Chicago will rise up like a phoenix

from the ashes.” Medill effected many changes to the city, including a new building code, in which every building in the city was to be constructed of brick. Medill also reformed the fire and police departments of the city, which he believed were inadequately manned, contributing to the rapid speed of the fire.

As one many well conclude, Joseph Medill was a most important figure in Illinois history. Beginning in 1855, Medill was a vital source of energy and creativity to the *Chicago Tribune*, which was infused with a bold Republican voice. Through his work with the *Tribune*, Medill influenced Illinois’ attitude towards Abraham Lincoln and convinced the majority of Illinois to support him. Years later, Medill was elected mayor of the city of Chicago. Shining in this capacity, Medill became a strong, guiding force for Chicago and helped it rebuild after experiencing devastation. Indeed, it takes a man of extraordinary courage, intellect, boldness, and vitality to match Medill’s many achievements and he, therefore, deserves to be remembered. [From *A Century of Tribune Editorials*; Northwestern Medill School of Journalism

<<http://www.medill.northwestern.edu/whois/.html>> (Sept. 14, 2004); Richard Norton Smith, *The Colonel*; Stevenson Swanson, ed. *Chicago Days*.]